

Chapter 17

The Call in the Night

The telephone rang at 3:30 am on August 11, 1961. I groaned and rolled over to blot out the sound. I had just returned the evening before from 10 days in Washington, DC and was suffering from jet lag. The phone rang again. Dee Jay kicked me and hissed, "Pick up the phone." I groaned again and reached out for the damn thing.

"Hello," I mumbled. A crisp female voice said, "Adam Yarmolinsky, Special Assistant to Secretary McNamara, is calling. Please hold."

The name, Yarmolinsky, got me wide awake. Both Yarmolinsky and his boss, Robert S. McNamara, the new Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy Cabinet, had testified at the hearings that I had attended the past week. The hearings were about the new civil defense effort that President Kennedy was proposing. What on earth did Yarmolinsky want with me at this ungodly hour?

"Mr. Walmer Strobe?" inquired Yarmolinsky's voice. I acknowledged. "You undoubtedly know that President Kennedy has transferred responsibility for the new civil defense program to the Department of Defense. I am charged with assembling the organization to carry it out. There is thirteen million dollars in the budget for research and development and your name has been mentioned as a possibility for Director of Research in our Office of Civil Defense. I would like to interview you in person Monday morning if at all possible."

I was taken aback. I had never once considered leaving NRDL, let alone leaving California. I had participated in a weeklong set of hearings on the new civil defense program; had listened to McNamara tell of his need to assemble a new organization to carry out his new assignment; and had never thought myself involved at all. After all, I was a bare nine months into my new job as Associate Scientific Director of the Lab and was testing my ability to run a 600-person multi-disciplinary research facility. Yarmolinsky had caught me flatfooted.

"My Lord," I gasped, "I just got back last night from a week in Washington and haven't even checked into the Lab yet. I don't know if my CO will be happy at my leaving again immediately."

"Don't worry about that," responded Yarmolinsky, "This office will take care of everything. See you on Monday." He rang off. I guess there aren't enough hours in the day for a man who is at work at 6:30 in the morning, Washington time.

DeeJay and I talked the rest of the night away in Los Altos. The idea of a move back to Virginia was so new that neither of us could fully grasp it. We veered from refusing even to go for the interview to making an impossible salary demand. I pointed out that there must be dozens of highly qualified people available for that plum of a job, so my being

chosen was not very likely. We finally decided I should go for the interview if Captain Roth, the new Commanding Officer, was willing. But I knew the power of the Pentagon and took a packed bag with me to the Lab in the morning. By noon, I was on a flight back to Washington.

As I sat back in my reclining seat, I had plenty of time to think about my situation. DeeJay and I had hashed it out during the wee hours of the morning. Both of us were unenthusiastic about the prospect of moving back to Washington. I liked what I was doing at the Laboratory. Back in October of the past year, 1960, our Scientific Director, Paul Tompkins, had decided to seek greener pastures. The number two man in the Scientific Department, Associate Scientific Director Gene Cooper, moved up and I was promoted into the Associate Scientific Director spot. At NRDL, the Scientific Director looked to the future, planned the upcoming program and sought fiscal support from the various agencies that were prospective sponsors of the work. The Associate Scientific Director was responsible for carrying out the approved program, supervising the Division Heads, and seeing that deadlines were met. Nine months in the job had convinced me I could do all that, institute improvements, and still have at least a quarter of my time to pursue my independent research.

In addition, I was pursuing a PhD in operations research at the University of California at Berkeley across the Bay. The field was largely advanced mathematics—Boolean and other algebras, game theory, queuing theory, etc. I had nearly completed all the course work and was discussing my dissertation topic with my faculty advisor. In effect, I had completed my Master's degree and was a year away from the Ph.D. If I took this job in the Pentagon, I could kiss the Ph.D. goodbye.

Most of all, I really liked living in California. The 1950s were a golden decade for us. The kids had grown up there, were young teenagers now (15 and 13). All our friends were here in California. DeeJay was desolated at the very thought of leaving. She had blossomed as a real estate agent. We had our dream house on Country Club Drive and four or five rental properties in Los Altos and Mountain View that she had picked up when the price was right. All that would have to be sold, the teenagers uprooted from their lifelong friends, and a new start made back East.

A Short History of Civil Defense

I also had some qualms about the new position in the just-formed Office of Civil Defense. On the surface it represented a major leap upward in my career. After all, my position at NRDL was number two man in a field organization with a \$6 million budget. My boss's boss was a Navy Captain who wasn't going to make Admiral. In the new job, I would control \$13 million in research and my boss's boss would be the Secretary of Defense. Pretty impressive, yes, but how permanent would it be?

All during the 1950s I had had contact with technical people from the national civil defense organization but I had paid little attention to the larger policy and political

environment within which these people had worked. But during the past nine days I had listened to some high-level debate, studied reams of submitted documents and read up on a lot of civil defense history. I was able to do this because for the first time I was not just a witness testifying at a congressional hearing. Representative Holifield had requested my assistance to his staff for these hearings on the Kennedy civil defense initiative and the Navy had agreed. So I worked with Herb Roback and his staff and sat behind the committee where I could slip notes to Herb with questions to ask the witnesses. The experience was a revelation to me on how the legislative branch of government works.

What I learned was that civil defense in the nuclear age was for the most part an unwanted burden on the executive branch in Washington. Following the end of World War II, the Truman Administration kept the subject under study (the Bull report, etc.) for several years. But the nuclear test by the Soviets in 1949 and the onset of the Korean War in 1950 greatly increased the political pressure from the States and the large cities. President Truman believed that the Russians would not have a real nuclear capability for many years but he could not resist the pressure. He signed the Federal Civil Defense Act, Public Law 920, in January 1951. The effect of the law was to strip the Federal government of all direct responsibility for civil defense. Operational civil defense was made the primary responsibility of State and local government. The Federal role was to provide guidance, leadership, and aid in the form of matching funds.

A wily politician, Truman ostensibly adopted the program proposed by the latest study: Identify potential shelter in existing buildings in cities and upgrade them for blast and fire resistance. This effort was estimated to cost \$3 billion over a three-year period, half to be borne by State and local government. The States were ready but Truman was not. He put about \$500 million in his budget each of the first three years and then depended on his friends in the House to cut the appropriations to a mere \$50 million. This 90 percent reduction conditioned Congressional committees to regard civil defense budget requests lightly. Token funding was the history of civil defense throughout the 1950s. When John F. Kennedy became president, the FY 1962 appropriation was \$86.6 million, an amount that Secretary of Defense McNamara had characterized at last week's hearings as "buying an organization but not a program." What Kennedy had jammed through Congress without significant resistance was an emergency appropriation of over 207 million dollars additional. I wondered whether he could reverse the past history and do it again the next year. Of course, in any event the job would not be in jeopardy but the resources available might become pinched.

The Trap is Sprung

Thus, I was filled with mixed emotions as I arrived at the Pentagon the next morning. I had been to the Pentagon several times when I had business with Dr. Herbert "Pete" Scoville of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project but most of my Washington trips had led to Main Navy or to Capitol Hill. The Pentagon not only is five sided. It also has five floors (aboveground) and really is five separate buildings, one inside the other. Each building except the innermost has a central hall with offices on both sides. The innermost

has offices only on one side. The other side has windows looking out on the central courtyard, known by the inhabitants as Ground Zero.

The innermost building is called the A Ring. B Ring is next out; the outermost is the E Ring. The E Ring is more prestigious than the others. To have an office on the outside of the E Ring so you can look out on the parking lot means that you have arrived. I was headed for Room 3E528, one of those outside offices.

I took the ramp to the third floor, which was devoted to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, his deputies and his seven assistant secretaries. I walked out Corridor 5 to the E Ring and turned right. Room 3E528 was close by. I entered an area occupied by two secretaries. Behind them were two modest offices each with a window overlooking the parking lot. To my right was a closed door. The secretary took my name, spoke into an intercom and directed me through the closed door. It opened into an office so immense it shocked me—three windows overlooking the parking lot—and a large mahogany deck at the far end from which Adam Yarmolinsky was rising to greet me. I remember thinking that if this were the office of a special assistant to the Secretary, the Secretary's office must be phenomenal.

Mr. Yarmolinsky shook my hand, offered me a chair and coffee. I agreed to both and the secretary brought cups and a carafe at once. After pleasantries and apologies for dragging me back to Washington, Yarmolinsky took a folder from among several stacked on his desk and opened it. After studying it for a moment, he said, "I believe you were at the hearings last week." I admitted that I was there. "As you know" he said, "there were several options under consideration for this organization. It hasn't been announced yet but the President has decided that the head of the Office of Civil Defense will be an Assistant Secretary for Civil Defense. The current law allows seven assistant secretaries and there is one vacancy now that installations and logistics have been combined." He went on to indicate that one of JFK's college classmates, a Washington lawyer, was being considered for the job. He didn't name the gentleman. He then launched into a dissertation on the importance being placed on civil defense research in the President's mind and why Secretary McNamara needed me to direct the effort. It was a not-so-subtle sales pitch and immensely flattering to my ego. I decided to stop the pitch by invoking the ridiculous demand that DeeJay and I had agreed upon. I recounted to him the problems I had with kids in school, wife in business, and the like. "I really can't uproot my family and move back to Washington unless I'm given the top salary in the Civil Service."

Yarmolinsky looked down at the folder on his desk and I thought I had him. Then he looked up again and said, "OK." I realized belatedly that I had just accepted the job.

California, I'm Outa Here

The ensuing weeks are now a complete blur to me. I must have signed some papers after leaving Yarmolinsky's office but I don't even remember the plane ride back to San Francisco. I do remember DeeJay's reaction when I told her I had accepted the job. "I won't go," she cried. "But it's the top of the Civil Service," I protested. Later, she accused me of deserting her. I countered with a legal opinion that she would be deserting me if she failed to accompany me back to Virginia. Of course, we compromised. I had committed myself to show up for work at the Pentagon in mid-September. She and the children would wait until the end of the school year in June 1962 before they joined me.

The news of my leave-taking also was a shock at NRDL although Captain Roth rather knew the outcome from his contacts at the Pentagon. Privately he told me that I would have been chosen Scientific Director rather than Gene Cooper if only I had had a PhD. Now I was about to call my faculty advisor at Cal Berkeley to tell him I was dropping out of graduate school.

There really wasn't much for me to do to wrap things up at the Radlab. So I spent some time thinking about my new job and how to prepare for it. I knew I was going to supervise a large contract research effort, one very much larger than the one OCDM had been pursuing. I thought I had a pretty good idea what research needed to be done but I didn't have a clear-cut structure of the program. I realized that I needed such a structure, yet one did not come readily to mind. Then, as I was packing my office gear, I came across my TR-74, the countermeasure system report. The germ of a structure came to me.

I got a lined pad and wrote "Civil Defense Research Program" on the top line. Below I put a large number 1 and wrote "Shelter" opposite it. Shelter is the central countermeasure in the Emergency Phase. I left a generous amount of space before I wrote the number 2. Here I wanted the research on the countermeasures supporting shelter, such as warning, communications, firefighting, rescue, and medical aid. I called this "Emergency Operations." For number 3, I first put Decontamination, the central countermeasure in the Operational Recovery Phase, but after some thought I chose to name the category, "Postattack Research." Finally, I thought of the systems studies of the type done by Herman Kahn. I created a fourth category for this kind of work.

Next, I went back to the Shelter category and considered what ought to be covered there. I wrote "1.1 Protection Studies" and "1.2 Habitability Studies" and so on. After several hours of work, I had a complete structural outline of my future research program.

My last day at NRDL was September 1st. There was a going-away luncheon at which I received the obligatory desk pen set (which I still have), a marvelous little model of the windowless NRDL building (which I still have) and a beautiful album of pictures from my 12 years at NRDL (which I still have.) Somehow I had acquired an unfurnished apartment (#J1054) in Arlington Towers, a group of high-rise apartment buildings north of Arlington Cemetery and within walking distance of the Pentagon. I rented a large U-Haul trailer, loaded it with a huge sofa, beds, bureaus and other necessities, and hooked it to the big Lincoln town car. The day after Labor Day I kissed my family goodbye and

set off across country. As I passed the crest of Donner Pass I said goodbye to “California Living”—and hello to “Life on the E Ring.”